
Abel Fletcher (1820-1890)

Among the treasured collections of the Massillon Museum are photographs of Massillon as it appeared in the 1850s. The pictures serve as a historic record of our city and a mark of the progress of photography in its early states.

Abel Fletcher, was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1820, and began experimenting with photography at the age of sixteen by making lenses from a broken tumbler. After briefly serving as a Universalistic minister in his hometown and in Philadelphia, Fletcher abandoned this calling, settled in Massillon, and turned his attention to photography. He set up his studio in a third floor garret room at 31 South Erie Street in 1845, a time when nearly all of this nation's photography was done by traveling photographers. Fletcher married soon after his arrival in Massillon. He and his wife lived on Cherry Street, east of Prospect (presently Fourth Street). He worked in the "picture gallery" making daguerreotypes of local residents and visiting notables including Lucretia Mott, the anti-slavery lecturer. Several photographers of South Erie Street which are now in the Museum collection were taken from the studio windows.

The daguerreotype process which involved the use of metal plates, did not allow for reprints. Fletcher experimented, as did many photographers of the time, with glass plate negatives, but found them to be impractical. About 1846 Fletcher developed a method to produce pictures on paper negatives, so that unlimited reprints could be made. Fox Talbot, an internationally known English scientist, is given credit for the invention of the paper negatives few years earlier, Able Fletcher, who knew nothing of the English method, devised an entirely different process, and is now generally credited

with the first American use of the paper negative. Fletcher's process was never perfected, however, because a disastrous explosion of concentrated ammonia in his laboratory blinded him in 1859.

After the accident, Fletcher attended a state school for the blind in Columbus, where he learned to make brooms. He set up shop in Massillon, but later turned to writing poetry, song lyrics and articles for farm journals and the local paper. He designed a table and hand guide which enabled the blind to write in 1871. Dr. Abraham Metz of Massillon, a renowned pioneer in optical surgery, attempted to restore Fletcher's vision. Although there was slight improvement on one eye, Fletcher could continue neither his photographic nor scientific work. Fletcher died at the age of seventy and is buried in Massillon Cemetery.

Abel Fletcher never disclosed his formula for the paper negative, but evidence of his discovery remains. Fletcher's wife and his daughter, Lillian, continued to operate the studio quite prosperously until the time of Mrs. Fletcher's death. Then Lillian moved to California. Although prior to the establishment of the Massillon Museum, Miss Fletcher donated much of her father's work, primarily views of Massillon, to the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian Institution, the Massillon Museum has since obtained some of Fletcher's work.

Abel Fletcher Gallery



View of Downtown Massillon, nd
Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum



Self-Portrait, c. 1856
Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum
Gift of Mrs. Abel Fletcher



Mr. and Mrs. Able Fletcher, c. 1856
Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum
Gift of Mrs. Abel Fletcher

Abel Fletcher/Belle Johnson and Portraiture

Teacher Guide

Preparation

- Students should be introduced to a brief history of photography, including photographic techniques and processes (i.e. daguerreotypes, tintypes and ambrotypes).
 - This preparation can include observing the photography timeline at this web-site as well as the early daguerreotypes, tintypes and ambrotypes included at this web-site.

Project

- A classroom discussion based on the comparison of a portrait done by Abel Fletcher in the 1840s to a portrait by Belle Johnson done in the 1890s or early 1900s.
 - The discussion should include a description of the two images, their similarities and differences.
 - The teacher can guide the discussion toward student discovery of clothing and hair style changes, limitations of the photo processes and their impact on the subjects of the photos, and the differences in mannerisms, attitude and demeanor of the subjects within the historic times that they lived.
 - The discussion should bring the student to the realization that photographs are very valuable insights into the lives and styles of past generations.

Abel Fletcher/Belle Johnson

Lesson Plan for Photography

Class discussion and participation:

Introduction: Various forms of visual art give us a picture of life at different times. These images can include examples of clothing, hair and furniture styles; personal and physical appearances and attitudes and how a particular location can look so different from the way it looks today. Photography, a relatively recent form of visual art, gives us an accurate reflection of all of those different aspects of life, from the 1840s to the very recent past.

Goal: Each student will gain an awareness, understanding and appreciation of the ability of photography to provide an accurate image of lifestyles of the past 160 years.

Objectives:

1. Show students that photographs are more accurate in showing past times than are other visual mediums.
2. Demonstrate changes of lifestyles of a relatively brief period of time (50 years) by comparing photos from different generations.
3. Illustrate the value of photography as a tool for research.
4. Investigate the limitations of earlier forms of photography in capturing an image.
5. Demonstrate the impact of developing photographic technology on the artists ability to capture images.

Materials: No production materials are necessary. Students need to be able to reference the Web Educational Program on the Massillon Museum's web-site, either on individual monitors or by computer projection, controlled by the teacher.

Note: This web page includes a photograph by Abel Fletcher from the 1840s and a photograph by Belle Johnson from the 1890s. Additional photographs can be accessed and moved to this web page from the gallery pages of these and other photographers represented in the permanent collection of the Massillon Museum. This feature allows the teacher to tailor the class discussion to his/her own goals and objectives.

Procedures: This plan is designed to be used as a question and answer format within a class discussion situation. The teacher should formulate a series of questions designed to lead discussion toward the achievement of the stated goal and objectives or toward goals and objective formulated by the teacher.

Note: This plan can easily be altered to an individual written, question and answer format.

Assessment: A set of rubrics that are used with consistency can eliminate most of the variable subjectivity of an assessment. The rubrics listed below are some suggestions.

Rubrics:

1. Was the student alert and attentive during the discussion?
2. Did the student volunteer any contribution to the discussion?
3. Did the student ask questions?
4. Did the student write notes, if and when instructed to do so by the teacher?
5. Did the student passively participate by manipulating the web-site when asked to acquire further images?

Notes:

1. A short written assessment can be formulated in the form of short answer or in the form of a short reflective essay.
2. A suggested follow-up student exercise might be to ask each student to bring to class a photo from home that was taken very recently and another photo that was taken at least 10 or more years ago. The teacher would then ask for written responses to a series of questions designed to reinforce the goals and objectives of this plan.